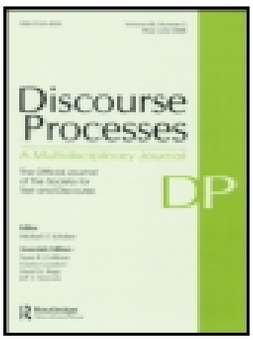

Discourse Processes

ISSN: 0163-853X (Print) 1532-6950 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hdsp20

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To cite this article: Jean Berko Gleason , Rivka Y. Perlmann & Esther Blank Greif (1984) What's the magic word: Learning language through politeness routines , Discourse Processes, 7:4, 493-502, DOI: 10.1080/01638538409544603

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01638538409544603

DISCOURSE PROCESSES 7, 493–502 (1984)

What's the Magic Word: Learning Language through Politeness Routines*

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This study examines the use of politeness routines at the dinner table in the homes of eight middle-class American families with preschool-age children. Politeness routines, for example *please, thank you, may I please be excused,* were used pervasively. In addition, in six of the eight families parents used routinized prompts for eliciting politeness from their children, for example, *What do you say?* and *What's the magic word?* The discussion considers the acquisition of routines not only as social markers and as evidence of linguistic socialization, but as having a linguistic function as well. Adults provide children with their earliest lessons in stylistic variation when they insist that the children change the form of their utterances to more polite variants (routines, politeness formulas, linguistic socialization, parental teaching, stylistic variation, developmental pragmatics)

INTRODUCTION

Politeness routines are a universal and pervasive phenomenon of human language. They have been described sociolinguistically and grammatically; Ferguson (1976), for example, formulated some precise rules for the use of certain politeness formulas in a number of languages, including American English and Syrian Arabic. Laver (1981) described the importance of routines during greeting and parting interactions, and suggested that routines can be a tool of polite behavior. He pointed out how one's choice of formulaic terms of greeting and parting are related to age and social status of the speaker and the listener. For example, in British English, "How do you do" is used primarily by middle-class and upper-class speakers, while "How do" and "Howdy" are more likely to be used by working-class speakers. House and Kaspar (1981) compared the use of politeness markers in German and English. From an analysis of complaints and requests, they found that, overall, Germans used more direct statements for both types of routines. They suggested that the differences may reflect different cultural organizations.

*This research was supported in part by grant #BNS 75-21909 from the National Science Foundation. We wish to thank Patricia Moylan for her help in preparing the transcripts. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Southeast Conference on Human Development in Alexandria, VA, April, 1980.

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Routines apparently also play a part in children's acquisition of the social and interactive components of language, even though they may have little internal structure or variability, and may not provide the child with much in the way of underlying cognitive or affective meaning (Gleason & Weintraub, 1976; Greif & Gleason, 1980). Infants, for instance, are taught to say *bye-bye* long before leave-taking has any meaning for them; older children learn to say *Trick or treat* on Halloween without knowing what *tricks* or *treats* are, and to say *thank you* even when they do not feel in the least thankful. Wilhite (1983) has shown that among Cakchiquel speakers an elaborate end-of-the-meal routine is performed before the speaker can take leave, and that very young children begin to acquire the nonverbal aspects of that routine, such as appropriate eye contact and body orientation even before they learn to speak. Politeness routines are often frozen, prefabricated units, to be used in certain delimited social situations. The fact that they may be frozen does not, however, make them unimportant (Goffman, 1971). Failure to use them can result in disastrous social consequences, while appropriate use can mark the speaker in many positive ways as a polite, considerate, thoughtful, person. As Coulmas (1981) has noted, "Routines are a means of guiding a person's normal participation in social interaction" (p. 6).

Routines like *bye-bye* or *thank you* are explicitly taught by parents, who can be observed coaching and drilling their children to perform them on the required social occasions, often modeling the forms themselves. While the acquisition of referential speech may involve children's producing words only after they have gained some concept of their referents, the acquisition of politeness routines usually involves an intervening adult who insists the child produce a form even if the child does not yet recognize the requirements of the social situation and may not be able to analyze the formula linguistically.

The social importance of politeness formulas is fairly obvious; politeness forms may, however, serve important linguistic functions as well. A number of researchers concerned with formulaic speech or routines in general (Hakuta, 1974; Peters, 1983; Snow and Goldfield, 1983) have concluded that in both first- and second-language acquisition the units of language acquired by children are specific to certain highly routinized events in their lives. These units may be of varying lengths, including fairly large chunks that the child may learn to produce appropriately before gaining the ability to analyze them. The present study extends previous laboratory and field research on the acquisition of routines to the setting of the child's home. It argues that the routines which parents use and direct their children to use serve not merely as a way of drilling speech formulas into the children, but also as a way of teaching children about the function of language in social interaction in general, and, more specifically, as a context for learning stylistic variation.

METHOD AND SUBJECTS

Dinner table conversations were recorded in the homes of eight families. Four of the families consisted of a mother, father, and female target child, while the

other four had a male target child. These eight children ranged in age from 3 years 1 month to 4 years 11 months, with a mean age of 3 years 6 months. The total number of subjects whose speech was analyzed was thus 24. The families were all middle class or upper-middle class white Boston-area residents who were also participating in a larger laboratory study of parent-child interaction and the acquisition of communicative competence (see also Bellinger & Gleason, 1982; Gleason & Weintraub, 1978; Greif & Gleason, 1980; Masur & Gleason, 1980). The parents had all volunteered to participate after seeing local advertisements or as a result of a request received through their child's preschool or daycare center.

In order to obtain recordings of naturalistic interaction, a cassette recorder was placed in an inconspicuous part of the room where the family ate, and it was left to run throughout the evening meal. No observer was present. The recordings, which ranged in length from 14 to 35 minutes, were collected and transcribed by trained research assistants; these transcripts form the basis of the analyses and discussion presented here.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequencies and Inequities

The use of routines at the dinner table was pervasive; each family used at least some politeness routines, (e.g., *please, thank you, may I please be excused, your're welcome*); and six of the eight families used routinized prompts for routines as well (e.g., *what do you say?, what's the magic word?*). The two families that did not prompt at home did so in the laboratory portion of this study, so there is every reason to believe that all families prompt on some occasions. The combined number of routines of both types produced per family ranged from 4 to 22, with a mean of 14.5 routines per family. The greatest number of routines were produced by children, who were responsible for 36. Fathers produced 34, and mothers produced 26, for a total of 96.

It should be noted that the fathers had more occasion to say *please* or *thanks* since they were being served. Most of these dinner scenarios involved a mother who served the food, and a father and child who were in some sense waited upon. Since the parents' roles were different in this situation, the role differences presumably override any possible sex differences in politeness. Thus, the fathers produced 19 occasioned routines, that is, those called for by the occasion, while mothers produced only 10. There was no evidence of differential treatment of girls and boys; children of both sexes were frequently prompted or encouraged to be polite, and ultimately exceeded the parents in the number of routines produced. Most of the parents' routines were attempts to get the child to be polite. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the numbers and types of routines produced by parents and children.

As we noted, all of the families used politeness markers, and most of the

TABLE 1
Number of Routines Produced at the Table During Eight Family Dinners

PARENTS	Spontaneous to one another	Spontaneous to child		Directive to child		Prompts to child		Modeling to child		Total
		boy	girl	boy	girl	boy	girl	boy	girl	
Mothers (n=8)	2	0	2	2	5	3	6	3	3	26
Fathers (n=8)	9	0	4	2	5	4	5	5	0	34
Total	11	6		14		18		11		60

CHILDREN	Spontaneous	Prompted	Directive (pleading)	Total
Boys (n=8)	1	6	7	14
Girls (n=8)	7	15	0	22
Total	8	21	7	36

families also engaged in explicit teaching episodes with their children. The pervasiveness of politeness routines is indicated by the fact that there was a total of 53 separate interchanges involving them in the transcripts of the eight dinners. The dinners ranged from 14 to 35 min, with an average length of 25 min (199 min total recording time). Thus, interchanges involving politeness routines occurred on the average once every 3.75 min. Even the family with the shortest dinner (14 min) engaged in 11 interchanges and produced 16 politeness routines; while this seems to be a remarkably large number of routines, it should be noted that the tape of this dinner does not sound in the least unusual. The small sample size does not permit wide generalization about the pervasiveness of routines during American family dinners. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that these are other than representative middle-class families.

The unequal linguistic and social status of children and parents can be seen in these interchanges. The parents are clearly didactic and directive when dealing with their children, and there is no reciprocity in the production of prompts or modeling for politeness, or in explicitly directive requests for action. The children were constantly being asked to recouch their utterances in polite form. One family even tried to get their daughter to begin again and repeat a scene where she had, after prompting, asked to be excused from the table. In another family, the father used a rather rude and sardonic style in his attempt to elicit politeness from his son:

Father: You don't get any until you say the magic word, wise guy. Don't give me that stare. Oh, brother.

This tendency for fathers to use rather demeaning terms with their sons has been noted in other family situations as well (Gleason, 1973), but it washes out in the laboratory, where parents are more likely to take into account the fact that they are being observed. The status difference between parents and children is also accented by the existence of routines like *may I please be excused?*, since this is a form that is basically reserved for children; an adult who intends leaving the table may say *excuse me*, but only a child must ask for permission and wait for it to be granted.

Types of Routines

The routines most frequently observed at the dinner table were *please, thank you, may I be excused?, what's the magic word?, please what?, what do you say?*, and occasionally, *pardon, I beg your pardon, you're welcome, bless you,* and a number of variants on the above. The routines can be classified according to their function as occasioned, directive, prompts, or models.

Occasioned Routines

This is a routine that is produced without prompting, and according to the dictates of ordinary politeness on a given occasion. Only 28% of the routines produced by the adults were of this type; the others were used in some way to affect the behavior of the children. All adult routines to other adults were occasioned in the sense it is used here.

Father to three-year-old daughter: Thank you, lovey.
Son to mother: I want another corn, please.

Directive Routines

Parent utterances to children frequently took a form that is unlikely to occur in adult-adult discourse, a direct imperative of the least polite form, with an appended politeness marker:

Mother: You're not to drink any more of this until you eat some more of that egg, please.
Daughter: But I want to—and I did eat the egg.
Mother: Well, eat, make the plate all clean. Don't wipe your face on your shirt, please.

Children used *please* directively on some occasions when the parent had rejected an initial request. This was typically uttered in a whining tone, with a greatly elongated vowel:

Son: (Eating watermelon) Mom, can I use this to get the seeds out? Can I use this thing to get the seeds out?
Mother: That's not what that's for. It's a nutcracker.
Son: But I can get . . . I can get seeds out. Can I get the seeds out? Mom, *please?*

As Table 1 indicates, more of these directive pleading routines were produced by boys, and more occasioned routines were produced by girls, but the small number of subjects does not permit tests of statistical significance.

Directive routines are thus attempts on the part of children or parents to obtain compliance from others. When adults use them, they are not attempts to teach politeness and, in fact, children are not permitted to use the adults' form. This is further evidence of the unequal status of children and parents, since adults may use direct imperatives when speaking to children, but children must resort to pleading when dealing with reluctant adults.

Prompts

These were attempts to elicit the routine from the child, and usually were of a routinized form, like *what do you say?* or *please what?* (Adults never prompted one another, although this is sometimes done playfully, and, of course, children never prompted adults.)

Child: More juice, more juice, more juice, more juice, more juice.
Father I didn't hear, uh, the magic word, Katie.
Child: *Please.*

Prompts in this context ask for the form but do not contain all of it. These same children, however, were also seen in a laboratory politeness study (Greif & Gleason, 1980); in the laboratory each child was given a gift by a staff member, and both parent and child reactions were recorded. Under those circumstances, parents frequently directed the children, explicitly telling them what to say, for example, *Say thank you to Lise, Richard.* But here in the home the more indirect elicitation forms were used. There was a great deal of consistency in the degree to which individual families insisted upon politeness; those that stressed politeness in the laboratory did so at home as well. The majority of the children's routines (58%) were produced after prompting or modeling by the adult.

Models

Modeled routines consisted of the adult's answering for the child, or recasting the child's impolite request in polite form. Modeling may be resorted to when elicitation through prompting fails:

Mother: All, right, what do you ask daddy, what do you ask?
Daughter: Please.
Mother: Please what?
Daughter: (Mumbles unintelligibly)
Mother: May I be excused, right?

This example is interesting because the parent, not satisfied with the child's initial attempt at politeness, actually provides in the one episode a series of increasingly explicit demands for the routine, beginning with elicitation (*What do you ask?*), continuing with a prompt of a more specific nature (*Please what?*), and ending with a model (*May I be excused?*). This shifting of forms is not unlike parents' attempts to elicit other kinds of linguistic behavior from children; a common syntactic device employed by parents when children fail to respond to one form, a wh-question, for instance, is to switch to the less demanding yes/no format: *What did you have for lunch? Did you have spaghetti?*

Linguistic Implications

The social role of routines as devices whereby parents delimit children's status and behavior is apparent. What remains to be explored is the possible linguistic role of routines. Politeness routines occupy a special place in language acquisition for a number of reasons that we have tried to elucidate. It is important to note that they do not function in the way that other pragmatic categories do (cf. Bates, 1976). Ordinarily, we assume a child has acquired a pragmatic function by learning to map an underlying intention onto a linguistic form, as for instance, when a child learns to formulate a request. Presumably, a child who requests something is in a state of wanting that thing. A child who says *thank you,* however, is not necessarily in a state of thankfulness. The child's early expression of politeness arises primarily from the parent's intention to have a polite child. Ultimately, of course, children themselves want to be polite people, and in order to do so must learn to use polite forms and to recognize the social situations that call for them. Whether they would do this all by themselves as early as they do is a moot question, since every family that we have seen has engaged in some form of adult intervention aimed at getting the child to produce politeness forms.

Routines can be seen as functioning in several ways to increase the child's pragmatic awareness and ultimate linguistic competence. At the simplest level, a politeness form can be a marker or a flag that indicates the special nature of an utterance. For the youngest children in our sample, *please* serves in that capacity. The child says *more milk,* and the parent insists that she or he say *more milk, please.* This occurs particularly with children who may not yet be able to form more syntactically complex requests, those that require modals and inversion, for instance. By insisting on the *please,* however, the parent has indicated to the child just that class of utterances that will ultimately require special treatment;

the parent has thus helped the child to gain pragmatic awareness before syntactic competence.

Another kind of routine is not so much a marker as an unanalyzed chunk. *May I be excused* probably functions as such a unit to a child of three or four, who may learn to produce it, but may not decompose it until years later, when the meaning of *to be excused* in other contexts becomes clear. Ferguson (1976) has suggested that children learn and use prefabricated chunks of the language as a kind of interim strategy, until such time as the child is able to decompose them and free their elements for creative recombination. Peters (1983) adds that the routine need not be completely fixed, but may have open slots that the speaker can fill in with words that are appropriate to the immediate situation.

The production of unanalyzed chunks, like politeness routines, is one instance of learning to perform before syntactic competence is acquired. Making a complex form part of a speaker's repertoire may call attention to that form and facilitate its ultimate incorporation into the speaker's linguistic system. While much attention in the past few years has been focused on the creative aspects of language, it is clear that both adults and children also operate with chunks of varying size, some of which may never be analyzed, and others which reveal themselves at times that may be quite distant from the period of their acquisition (Bolinger, 1976). Some of the politeness routines called for at the dinner table are clearly acquired by children as unanalyzed chunks, but there is no reason to believe that at least some parts of language are not acquired this way in other situations as well. Most daily activities that young children engage in, in addition to eating—bathing, going to bed, dressing—are highly routinized and accompanied by predictable adult utterances which may be processed by children in units that are much larger than adult analysis would yield. A phrase as simple as *It's time for bed, now,* for instance, may be learned as a unit, rather than as a productive frame. Attention to children's linguistic production has emphasized the creative and combinatory facets of language. Early comprehension, however, may be much more globally and situationally determined, based as it is on the routinized utterances surrounding everyday activities.

A final way in which routines may affect the child's linguistic development involves the learning of routines as polite variants. While a young child who wants milk may be allowed to append a simple marker like *please* to *more milk,* an older child may be given a lesson in stylistic variation:

Child: Mommy, I want more milk.
Mother: Is that the way to ask?
Child: Please.
Mother: Please what?
Child: Please gimme milky.
Mother: No.
Child: Please gimme milk.

Mother: No.
Child: Please . . .
Mother: Please, may I have more milk?
Child: Please may I have more milk?

Here the child began with an intention (i.e., to obtain more milk) which she expressed first in a blunt statement: *I want more milk.* The mother rejected this request whereupon the child attempted an imperative with an appended politeness marker, but this was also rejected, even though it is a form often used by these parents (e.g., *Eat your egg, please*). Ultimately, the parent led the child through several steps until she produced an elaborately polite request, complete with a modal and inversion. Unlike the rather opaque *May I be excused,* the frame, *May I have more X,* probably can be analyzed by the child and extended to new situations. Thus, at the same time that the child was learning to use a specific politeness formula, she was also learning how to express her intention in several varying linguistic forms; learning politeness routines is one way of learning stylistic variation at an early age. Earlier work has shown that politeness routines serve an important social function. Here we have shown that they serve a linguistic function as well.

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